

Sports Tourism in Albania: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This review evaluated significant sports and activities that can further boost Albania's sports tourism industry. However, government intervention and a policy framework are pivotal in making the Albanian sports industry-prosper. The study attempted to bridge the gap by exploring the current state of research on sports tourism and discussing the need and prominent strategies for the Albanian sports industry, which, despite having a locational advantage to fuel up their sports tourism industry, is underdeveloped. This research will be beneficial due to the revenue generation capability and customized modelling flexibility as per financial objectives set by the governments in this domain.

Keywords: Albania, sport, tourism, socio-economic, government policies.

1. Introduction

Tourism and sports are two different but closely related industries. Sport is important for recreation, personal development, and physical acclimatisation (Bozkurt 2017). In the words of Mollah et al. (2021), tourism can be described as a deliberate escape from routine environments for a more enjoyable experience, which can be achieved through holidays, business trips, sports monitoring in a foreign country, cultural tours, and medical tourism (Radicchi 2013). Sports tourism is the combination of sport and tourism (Standeven 1998). The global sports tourism market was estimated at USD 1617 million in 2020 and is expected to reach USD 2909 million by 2028, as it is at an emerging stage.

In Albanian context, which was under communist rule for a long time, started the process of democratisation in 1991. During the communist era, tourism was called a "social problem", but now it is making a comeback and becoming one of the cornerstones of the Albanian economy. Currently, tourism contributes more than 10% to the country's GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council 2020). In 2021, nearly 2.6 million people visited Albania on vacation or for other recreational purposes (Statista 2023). Albania's geophysical environment offers numerous opportunities for sports tourism growth. The country has mountains, coasts, rivers, and lakes that make it a place with tremendous sporting activities and developed tourism (Palushi et al. 2021).

According to Soedjarmiko (2015), sports tourism can act as a catalyst by increasing the value and perception of tourism in a positive way. In the case of Albania, despite its geographical advantages, sports tourism is still largely underdeveloped (World Bank Group 2022).

To date, research in the field of sports tourism at the global level has found that collaborations, country location advantages, government policy formulation and implementation, recreational activities, incentives and subsidies, and sustainable

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development goals are all ways to promote sports tourism, have positive effects on sports, tourism, and GDP growth, and create opportunities for socio-economic factors in countries (Mollah et al. 2021; Hinch and Ito 2017; Hinch et al. 2016).

However, to our knowledge, sports tourism in Albania has not yet been studied. In order to fill this knowledge gap, this paper reviews and explores the current state of research on sports tourism in Albania. In this sense, this study shows what is known and what still needs to be learned in order to identify scientific contributions to the sports tourism literature.

The study intends to synthesise the literature in the Albanian context through systematic literature review conducted using good quality journals published in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, which is in line with the research field from the 1990s until today. The study adds new exploration of dimensions which are as follows:

1. To assess the main sports and activities in Albania that can support the growth of the sports tourism industry.
2. To explore the needs and strategies for improving sports tourism from the perspective of Albanian stakeholders (including stakeholders such as government agencies involved in sports and tourism, government support and qualification programmes, and academic programmes offered by educational institutions).
3. Impact of the sports tourism industry on the social life of the Albanian population.

Lastly, help in understanding the expectations and perceptions of stakeholders to meet their specific needs and enhance their experience (Burlea-Schiopoiu and Ferjolt, 2021).

2. Literature review

Cross-cultural countries hosting events and, more recently, Middle Eastern countries hosting the World Cup have fuelled the literature on sports tourism in the last decade. Academic scholars are interested in following technical breakthroughs, product development methods, and differentiators in sports tourism. This interest is reflected in recent research on techno-economic feasibility and modelling in sports tourism with active consumer participation.

Miyake et al. (2018) suggested mobile app-based promotion of sports tourism, implicating that technological uptake, ease of access, and customer experience can enhance sports tourism promotion. Users can now readily obtain information about sporting events, including how to buy tickets, event dates, and more, thanks to this programme. This programme is based on three key elements (location, time, and a detailed programme of the event) and has also been developed as a platform where numerous businesses can take part. The app's user data analysis demonstrated how athletic activities could positively impact everyday life. The review by the users is highly followed by other users to decide their presence at other events, implicating a user-driven mechanism that can be tapped for future revenue generation.

Sports tourism activities, according to Salcines et al. (2017), promote city exploration and the development of new identities. The research approach was to attend the global cycling sports Grand Depart Tour de France bicycle races at Utrecht and simultaneously take a tour of a city to develop a new identity (self and guest country cultural aspects). Similarly, Jespon (2017) mentioned in his sports tourism book new themes emerging such as medical tourism, social entrepreneurship, developing economies, mega events, education, and health that have revolutionised the global economy sector. In his book, Mosko (2016) emphasises international sporting events while concentrating on the connection between sports and tourism. Sul (2016) has stressed the need for such groups to be hosted in order to grow the tourism industry and attract more foreign visitors to Korea for the Winter Olympics. More proactive and organised marketing and promotion efforts should be undertaken for this goal, and the required security measures should be implemented.

However, there is a dark side to sports tourism too that has been less discussed in academic research, contradicting the findings of the abovementioned study. For example, to be in the global race, Portugal proceeded with water sports without realising the limitations in their infrastructure, a poorly developed and managed social media platform, and a lack of strategic objectives (Correia and Sebastiao 2017). Similarly, Kenya faced challenges such as traffic issues, environmental issues, safety issues, and social conflicts against the benefits that have been highlighted by the government, such as infrastructure development, cross-cultural acceptance, urban development, and international reputation improvement (Njoroge et al. 2017). Similarly, poor waste management, improper use of public facilities, plastic waste, damage to the local environment, and local culture have been masked by the success of mega events such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup (Korstanje 2016).

Few studies have approached sports tourism in the context of sustainability issues and solutions. Undoubtedly, a country like Japan has developed significantly in terms of sports tourism, but it raises some serious concerns, such as sustainability. Similarly, Dobay et al. (2017) pointed out the environmental degradation that has occurred at different places, namely Duna-Ipoly National Park and Pilis Region, situated in Budapest. Such studies motivate us to think about sports tourism development in a sustainable way, implicating more research and innovation. Hinch and Holt (2017) advocated the use of sustainability practises in sports tourism and promoted them among potential consumers to understand their perspective on sustainable sports tourism and what improvements as consumers they are seeking in that domain. As awareness and sensitivity towards sports tourism are increasing at an aggressive rate, such strategies will help in developing a more consumer-centric, sustainable business model that can be implemented at the local and international levels. Most studies advocate a sustainable sports tourism approach to be developed for preserving the economic, social, cultural, and, most importantly, the natural diversity of a location that is impossible to replace.

Few studies in the field of sports tourism have demonstrated that collaborations as a strategy have a positive impact on countries' sports tourism (Mollah et al. 2021). Collaboration, according to Liburd (2018), is the collective effort of stakeholders to achieve a common goal. Existing researchers, such as Ahmed et al. (1996), revealed that collaboration in sport tourism has resulted in successful events, the likeability of sports or a specific sport, and the generation of tourism in a country from around the world. Sports collaborations and the rightful planning and implementation of government policies not only bring tourism but also promote sports activities, such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 2004 PGA Championship (United States Professional Golf Association) (Lim and Patterson 2008). The Common Wealth Games, Asian Games, Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, ICC Cricket World Cup, Rugby World Cup, and CAF Africa Cup of Nations (or AFCON) are a few examples of mega events that have significantly boosted sport and tourism while also fostering positive relationships with other nations, their counterparts, employment opportunities, boosting economies, and improving socio-economic factors (Hinch et al. 2016; Othy and Swart 2020). In a similar vein, cooperation in sport tourism also promotes additional advantages, such as the growth of a sustainable sport tourism sector (Swart et al. 2018), an increase in visitor numbers, and the blending of various resources and abilities (Kennelly and Toohey 2014; Lim and Patterson 2008). Few literatures also tried to link sports tourism with their respective countries SDGs to open new doors of growth in their respective economies (Morfoulaki et al. 2023; Chersulich et al. 2020).

Extant research has been able to identify both the appealing and repulsive incentives that draw thousands of people each year to sporting events due to their involvement. Alsawafi (2017) looked into the reasons why people travel and the travel-related obstacles that stop people from engaging in sports. Income limitations and a lack of free time are two travel obstacles. While Aicher and Brenner (2015) discussed the motivations of individuals to

participate in sports tourism and came to the conclusion that organisational motives have an impact on external motivation but not on intrinsic motivation, Choi et al. (2016) claimed that the decision-making process in international sports tourism changes based on cultural characteristics, travel restrictions, and travel motivations.

In a children's village in Bradulet, Romania, Mercea combined sports and recreational activities with mountain tourism activities to determine the needs and expectations of current and potential customers in the tourism market. She concluded that it would be beneficial to identify these needs and expectations and access more specific niche markets to market the offered goods and services. According to Malyshev et al. (2016), including sports tourism activities in schools will improve student wellbeing and inspire them to learn. According to Bosnjak et al. (2016), tourists' expression of who they are while participating in sports activities contributes to their personal happiness. However, this situation may change depending on the perceived effort, perceived effort level, perceived importance, and potential for self-realisation of the activity.

Wen Lin and Fu Lu (2016), highlighting the significance of the growth of sports tourism in Thailand, suggested that in addition to local sports tourism resources and facilities making an effort to keep up with the growth of international sports tourism, local tourists should be given more options in the sports tourism market. The researchers emphasised the importance of a thorough examination of the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the local population as well as their attitudes. According to Peric and Wise (2015), the value that sporting activities offer to tourists can turn them into a one-of-a-kind experience. Tuptim (2014) conducted research on what visitors anticipate from the staff members who carry out sports tourism activities. Their top priorities are internalising and caring for the service they offer, followed by having a thorough understanding of their responsibilities. According to Richard et al. (2014), having the right tools makes it easier for students to manage and plan sports tourism events while also understanding and growing into their responsibilities and fully satisfying any informational demands.

This literature analysis provides a unique addition by analysing the historical development and present state of sports tourism in Albania from a complete governmental standpoint. The assessment provides a comprehensive analysis of the Albanian government's actions in sports policy, highlighting important milestones and demonstrating the impact of government involvement on the growth of sports tourism in the country. The clear emphasis on collaboration among government entities, sports federations, and the tourism industry highlights the distinct interaction of stakeholders, establishing the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the administrative frameworks and financial systems. In addition, the assessment emphasises the rising problems and difficulties, such as unfavourable depictions and sustainability worries, offering a forward-thinking viewpoint that enhances the analysis of sports tourism in Albania.

Geographically, Albania resides in the southeast of Europe. It shares land boundaries with Montenegro to the northwest, Kosovo to the northeast, North Macedonia to the east, and Greece to the south. It is situated between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas within the Mediterranean Sea. The nation exhibits a variety of geological, climatic, morphological, and hydrological conditions. Moreover, the terrain varies from the cold, snow-capped Alps of Albania through the Skanderbeg, Korab, Ceraunian Mountains, and Pindus to the warm, sunny Mediterranean beaches of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, making it perfect for tourism. Moreover, Albania's geophysical environment is gifted with numerous opportunities for the growth of sports tourism. As mountains cover approximately 70% of its land area, it has the potential to grow outdoor activities such as hiking, mountaineering, skiing, rafting, adventure racing, and so on. Moreover, its 427 kilometres of coastline allow for the expansion of water activities such as diving, kite surfing, and sea kayaking. Also, there are numerous rivers and lakes where water sports like fishing and whitewater kayaking can be developed (Palushi et al. 2021). "Albania Water Sport" is

a centre for professionals and active visitors who aim to promote and involve water-based outdoor activities all along Albania's coastline. All training sessions, events, and activities are accessible to members without charge throughout the year. Also, they rent out equipment. Long-term equipment rental contracts, equipment purchase discounts, special pricing for club events, equipment exchange and storage, etc. are all additional perks of membership. Individuals, families, clubs, and business users can use these amenities to participate in their daily activities. Wind surfing, kite surfing, sailing, stand-up paddling, water-based tours, and inclusive sport vacations are all available along Albania's coastline. Sektori Rinia, Agip, Porto Romano, and Saranda are only a handful of the bays for water sports. The locations were chosen as suitable destinations for sport tourism after being evaluated for their wind direction, wind speed, shoreline conditions, accessibility, and potential dangers and hazards. There were scant literatures viewing the main sports and activities in Albania that can support the growth of the sports tourism industry, therefore, this study have tried to bridge the gap in Albanian context.

Vladi (2014) highlighted that to promote tourism in Albania, three initiatives were developed. The initial strategy suggested some guidance on developing a marketing plan for the tourism industry. The only result of this initial strategy was the adoption of the tourism law, which set forth a number of priority sectors for tourism growth. The second strategy, which was in place from 2003 to 2012, called for identifying both short-term and long-term goals, as well as a thorough analysis of rivals, repositioning of the brand, and the prohibition of abusive buildings—all of which the concerned operators were unable to carry out. The National Agency of Tourism and the Albanian Tourist Association were both successful outcomes of this policy. The Ministry of Tourism is responsible for creating the third strategy, dubbed "Tourism Sectoral Strategy 2007-2013." It is an examination of two earlier texts with updated goals that emphasise cultural tourism. In 2010, a significant and comprehensive report on Albanian culture's marketing strategy was created. Although Albania boasts a vibrant culture, neither tourists nor native Albanians are particularly aware of this aspect of their country's tourism industry. The lack of understanding of the significance of conserving culture in all senses that this notion encompasses among commercial and public tourism sector operators is another reason why appropriate communication in this area has never been made.

Considering the years from 2001 to 2011, there has been an increase in passenger arrivals and departures in Albania. However, this number more accurately reflects an unchecked expansion rather than implying that the strategies used were to blame for this increase. A survey carried out by Tourism Development International in 2012 examined the factors contributing to the growth of tourism in Albania. Several goods were offered as alternatives to the query, "Why do you visit Albania?" 40.9% of those polled provided the response "other," indicating that none of the things were developed and advertised to draw tourists. Moreover, if literature that encourages travel to the Land of the Eagles is one of its assets, the situation with movies that feature Albania is very different. Frequently, this nation is linked to the mafia (*Taken*), to vengeance (*Der Albaner*), or to other themes that portray Albania as a dangerous place to visit. The shooting scenes in these powerful films portray poverty and underdevelopment rather than Albania's natural beauty. Also, the first stage is to train human resources on the value of high-quality services. Another area of weakness is the lack of reports that solely publish annual studies on tourism, providing the chance to develop experts in this subject. In addition, the concentration of authority in governmental power structures often makes it difficult to work with the private sector. Furthermore, a lack of proper training on a quality service makes it impossible to build a relationship marketing strategy that results in traveller destination loyalty (Vladi 2014).

Since 2012, the Albanian government has devised a national sports policy that focuses on promoting sports at all levels, including sports tourism. The policy intends to improve sports infrastructure, promote sports participation, and attract sports events and tourists to

Albania, such as sporting events: The Albanian government actively seeks to attract and organize international sporting events. It provides cash incentives, streamlined procedures, and logistical assistance to event organizers. The Tirana International Marathon and the Tour of Albania cycle race are two notable events staged in Albania. Sports tourism promotion: The Ministry of Tourism and Environment collaborates with the Ministry of Culture and Sports to promote sports tourism in Albania. They execute advertising programmes that showcase the country's sports facilities, natural landscapes, and the variety of sports activities available. Marketing efforts are directed at both domestic and foreign audiences. Cooperation with sports associations: To promote sports tourism, the government collaborates with national and international sports federations. Working together with the federations to organize sporting events, giving the required support, and marketing Albania as a sports tourist destination are all part of this. Sports infrastructure development: The government has made investments throughout the country in the creation and improvement of sports infrastructure. This involves the design and construction of stadiums, sports complexes, training facilities, and recreational places. Local sportsmen as well as sports tourists use these facilities. Training and capacity building: The government offers training and capacity-building programmes to help sports tourism stakeholders enhance their skills. Training tour operators, guides, and hotel experts to provide specialized services and experiences for sports tourists is part of this. Sustainable sports tourism: The Albanian government promotes sustainable sports tourism practices. This involves protecting the environment and promoting responsible tourist practices at sporting events and activities. Attempts are being made to reduce environmental damage and conserve natural resources.

Moreover, collaboration with the tourism sector: The government collaborates with the tourism industry, including tour operators and hoteliers, to enhance sports tourism services and experiences. The purpose of this collaboration is to provide visitors with comprehensive and appealing sports tourism services. Financial assistance and incentives: The government offers financial assistance and incentives to sports tourism initiatives. These include grants, subsidies, and financial options for sports event organizations, sports facility construction, and the marketing of sports tourism projects. Research and monitoring: The government conducts research and monitoring initiatives to analyze the impact of sports tourism and guide policy decisions. This includes researching visitor profiles and economic consequences, as well as identifying areas where sports tourism growth might be improved. However, consistency and implementation on the ground are limited. Not much study have studied the strategies for improving sports tourism in Albanian region, this study, have made an attempt to explore the needs and strategies for improving sports tourism from the perspective of Albanian stakeholders so that the region can soar to its full capacity and can contribute significantly in-terms of socio-economic development.

3. Discussion and Limitations

Although Albania has implemented three significant tourism development initiatives, it still lacks a genuine tourism destination brand. Regarding public opinion, Albania has changed from being a remote and unsafe nation to being seen as Europe's upcoming adventure destination (Exodus). Albania is a destination that has not yet been fully utilized by the mass visitors that travel in quest of an adventure or something novel; yet, this market is hardly ever devoted. In regard to marketing and developing word-of-mouth or buzz marketing techniques for the current group of tourists visiting Albania, measures should be considered to attract additional categories with greater spending power and those who may be exposed to destination loyalty strategies. The variety of tourism products offered by the area contributes to the continued growth of tourism, which is a good thing in and of itself. However, because the reasons for this growth are not fully understood and because there are currently many weaknesses and threats, it is more

important than ever to develop and implement a strategy that specifically involves private operators in order to raise awareness of the long-term benefits of this collaboration. Furthermore, new strategies where relevant actors can be optimally utilized to increase tourism avenues and can uplift their socio-economic status are the need of the hour; moreover, the right advertisement of Albania should be the action plan on which educational institutions and government institutions should work hand in hand so that the demand for sports tourism and leisure tourism can be created, as these will overall help the Albanian economy prosper. The paper has tried to bridge the gap about the main sports and activities in Albania that can support the growth of the sports tourism industry. Also, the paper tried to synthesis and explored the needs and strategies for improving sports tourism from the perspective of Albanian stakeholders and discovered that the impact of the sports tourism industry on the social life of the Albanian population is positive and prosperous the need of the hour is the right execution and supervision of policies.

The study's main drawback is that it only included open-access research publications that were indexed in the Web of Science database between 2006 and 2023. The analysis did not include research memos, book reviews, or studies presented at conferences. Moreover, studies about sports tourism can be looked up by using databases besides Web of Science. Moreover, the fact that the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar were the only sources of research data for this study is one of its limitations. The study's most fundamental weakness is this. Another drawback of the study might be attributed to the fact that only specific keywords (in the tourism category) were used to locate scientific articles on sports tourism. In the future, researchers should think about comparing the findings of this study by looking at broader topics and/or keywords like sports, tourism, and leisure time in addition to sports tourism.

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